

Travel



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Dominican Republic: a gem in the ocean

Columbus' discovery deserves rediscovery

SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic — I seldom recommend a travel destination, but I seldom discover a place that has as much to recommend it as the Dominican Republic. Christopher Columbus discovered it nearly 500 years ago, but it is waiting there now in an emerald-green sea, for modern explorers to discover again.

Columbus established the capital city of Santo Domingo in 1493, and today you can trace his voyages on a lighted map in the Casas Reales, a museum that is part of the beautifully restored old city.

Any map will show you that the Dominican Republic shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti, and that it shares the Caribbean Sea southeast of Florida with the other major islands of Cuba, Jamaica and Puerto Rico.

The Dominican is nothing at all like its neighbor islands however. Its developing tourist industry is in a stage of innocence that most of the other West Indies islands lost long ago.

AFTER CENTURIES of slavery, colonialism, dictatorships and political disarray, the Republic has a fragile but stable democracy eager to preserve its past and develop its tourist potential.

The streets are safe, the population is genuinely friendly to visitors, the prices are moderate and there is little of the culture shock that accompanies a visit across the border to Haiti.

Tourists often feel uncomfortable in Haiti because a large population of desperately poor blacks are still ruled by a few pale-skinned descendants of the original French plantation owners. Centuries of integration between Spaniards and slaves have created a Dominican population with a cohesive culture of its own.

When you fly to Detroit to the Dominican Republic, changing planes in



1-of-a-kind traveler
Iris Jones
contributing travel editor

Miami) you see the island as Columbus never did. Lush green mountains dominate the center of the island, with Santo Domingo tucked into a curve of bay on the south coast.

TOURISTS GO to two resort areas: to the newly-developing resorts north around Puerto Plata's sand beaches, which offer bargain rates to group travelers; and to the polo grounds, tennis courts and championship golf courses of Casa de Campo, an hour's drive east of Santo Domingo, designed for the individual traveler and small groups.

Margaret Zellers, respected author of Fielding's "Caribbean" gives Casa de Campo her Author's Award for accommodations in the Republic followed by the Hotel Santo Domingo (which is also run by Golf and Western, in the city). Her choice for the Puerto Plata area, 215 kilometers north is Jack Tar Village, where you can buy a week's vacation, including all meals, drinks and activities, for \$150 a day for two people.

I will focus on Casa de Campo and the Puerto Plata resorts next week. Your choice of resort areas will definitely determine your vacation style. Either way, however, you will spend some time in Santo Domingo.

THE OLD walled city provides living history in a ten-by-ten block area where the Ozama River flows into the



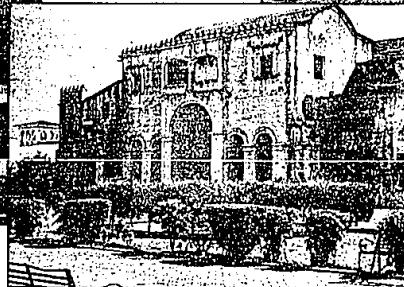
Photos by Mickey Jones

Caribbean Sea. There are dozens of historic buildings on the walking tour of this sixteenth-century city, but the most important are the Alcazar, also known as Casa de Colon, built in 1510 by Christopher Columbus's son; Casa Reales, fabulous museum rooms built in 16th century royal houses; and the Cathedral, oldest in the Americas.

Even a brief tour of Casas Reales takes you convincingly into the 16th century. Columbus' route on a lighted map, models of his ships, authentic cannons and other paraphernalia from that time, rooms of royal audience, model of the walled city.

You can tour the city on your own, but you will certainly be approached by the boys of Santo Domingo — Octavio, Jose, Juan, and a hundred others — who will follow you politely but firmly until you either shoo them away or hire them.

'Christopher Columbus discovered it nearly 500 years ago, but it is waiting there now, in an emerald-green sea, for modern explorers to discover again.'



Santo Domingo is a city rich in history and venerable buildings. Below left is the approach to Alcazar, also known as Casa de Colon, a 10-by-10-block area built in 1510 by Christopher Columbus's son. The narrow main street of the colonial city is El Conde (left). The street with its overlapping signs and rows of shops is usually filled with Dominicans strolling along with baskets and bags.

restaurant designed by the most famous Dominican of them all, Oscar de la Renta.

We also enjoyed Vesuvio, an Italian restaurant popular among local people and tourists; excellent antipasto, pastas and entrees in a busy, tasteful, happy environment. Moderately priced.

Downtown we enjoyed La Fonda, in a colonial setting on the second floor of La Alcazar, a restored 16th century area of shops across the street from Casa de Colon, about \$5 a person for a full lunch. Also a small Italian place around the corner from the cathedral, called El Bueo.

For more information on the Dominican Republic, contact the Dominican Tourist Information Center, 485 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10022.



One of the attractions in Santo Domingo is the tomb of Christopher Columbus in the Cathedral, North America's oldest such building. Columbus' tomb is elaborate and richly decorated.

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